

An Ugly Fairy Tale with an Ending of Hope: The Founding of KRIS in Finland

Matti “Kid” Hytönen

INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time there was an immature, self-indulgent man who had been in prison for a long, long time for many criminal activities. He had been unable to find any suitable place in society in which he could fit. He had come to believe that normal life was just for other people – for real people, not for him. So he went on drinking and using drugs. Alcoholism and drug addiction did provide him focus and drive in his life, a purpose sometimes so intense he would do whatever was necessary to feed his addictions. They were not kind masters. If he failed to satisfy them, they turned his own body against him with such torturous agonies of withdrawal, he would do what his body demanded. Do whatever he must to get more. Rational plans of action were a luxury. If plan A failed, physical need quickly drove him to plan B or C, which were not so much plans as acts of desperation. These acts eventually always ended with the same result: back to prison with another new sentence.

During those nineteen years behind bars, he had understood one underlying motivational force: drugs and booze. For him, this became all consuming and left room for little else. In prison, he had moments of clarity in which he saw a connection between his addictions and his behavior. He came to carry some weak ideas of sobriety – that if he would stop with all that stuff, maybe he could be one of the normal human beings, one of the real people. But he did not have enough guts to take the step or see a way out the abyss.

He went in and came out from different Scandinavian correctional institutions during the 1960s, during the 1970s and even during the 1980s. The world changed dramatically outside the prisons over these decades, so much it seemed impossible to for him to grasp and understand the world now surrounding him. In the late 1990s, this unhappy creature made the big step. He put all his power and will into leaving narcotics and alcohol behind him. Against the odds, he succeeded. He became one-hundred per cent sober.

SUDDEN IMPACT

The man described above was I. Sober, I discovered a new way of living. But it was not easy to combine one’s needs with the responsibilities in the

free world outside of prison. I carried a deep emptiness inside of me that was matched with the loneliness of my new situation. I was a sober being within a world I did not yet really have a purpose in. No longer living a life consumed by drugs, I had all the time in the world to think. I wanted to do something good. I realized it was not so easy to get other people to see inside me, to understand I was no longer that thief, that liar – that jerk. I started to study. I tried desperately to find rules of life to guide me. I read a lot, but I still found I had nothing to fill the emptiness of my soul.

One day I happened to read an article in some Finnish newspaper, about an organization in the neighboring country of Sweden. All the members in that organization were ex-cons. They had survived imprisonment and made successful re-entries into society. They were now using the experiences of their criminal past in their present work, helping others who still were swimming in the swamp they had escaped.

I felt a sudden impact. It was like a bolt of lightning through my brain. This was just what I had been thinking during these difficult, lonely years. How could I use my experiences and knowledge of drug addiction and crime to assist others to find their way to a life of freedom? It simply seemed so right. I felt an immediate kinship with this group. I was so eager to be able to use my experiences from those decades in prison, and my years of addiction and crime to find my place in society, and most of all to help others!

A TELEPHONE CALL

That newspaper article was published sometime in the shift to the millennium. I had started my new life after moving back from Sweden to Finland. I considered moving back to Sweden to be able to work with former Swedish ex-cons I read about, but wondered whether similar work could take place in Finland for the same purpose and for Finnish convicts. As I reflect on this I felt I had truly found my purpose and was filled with a sense of destiny that this would come be true.

In summer 2001 I got a telephone call from Katariina Pousi who had gotten much help from this Swedish organization called CRIS (Criminals Return Into Society) during and after her last sentence. She wanted to start a new life after all those years of addiction in Stockholm and in several Swedish prisons – but this time in Finland. She wanted to start CRIS, with the same guiding principles in her home country. She had been speaking

with Christer Karlsson, the President of CRIS in Sweden, who promised to give all possible spiritual support to get CRIS started in Finland.

Katariina called me and some others she knew that had changed their lifestyles. A meeting was held on September 22, 2001. About a dozen CRIS people arrived from Stockholm and 7 to 8 from Finland. My role was to translate the rules and the principals of CRIS into Finnish. *Translation changed the acronym CRIS to KRIS*. Katariina had handmade 150 sandwiches. There was coffee and tea. The discussion floated in optimistic waves. During that evening, KRIS was born in Finland!

DON'T LOOK BACK

There's an old saying: "Don't look back". But I have to look back to those first years to give insight on the difficulties we met as we tried to build KRIS in Finland. First of all, we did not have any funds. Money, the lack of it, would be one of the main obstacles on our journey creating KRIS. So we started begging. We went to every possible place to tell about our mission and to ask for support. In our meeting with the Ministry of Justice, they were listening, smiling and seemed to be interested. The passion burned bright and powerful as a half-dozen or so of us ex-convicts with burning hearts stood in the room and told them, "We together have been sentenced for over a hundred years – now we want to help our brothers and sisters for more than a hundred years!"

Afterwards we felt a bit disappointed. They had not given any direct answer. However, a few weeks later we started getting positive signals from the Ministry. They had been talking to important people. Our job now was to write requests to get money, which we did. In December 2003 we got a message from the main financing institution. We would get 15,000 Euros to start. We did not look back to the past anymore and looked towards a brand new horizon. Our thoughts on what we could accomplish knew no limits.

Everyone who was an active volunteer during those first shimmering months can remember one certain night where we happened to take three long trips to different prisons. You have to be at the prison gate at seven in the morning to be able to pick up and help one who is being released because at seven o'clock the gate opens. Prisoners are released whether their support person is there or not. An addict or criminal being released from prison without a knowledgeable support person to be there with them

is more likely to wander back into what they knew. Those that know can find narcotics or other action surprisingly fast once they are released. That night during those long drives, we were calling each other with our mobile phones. "Where are you?", one asked. "Oh, still 400 kilometers!", another responded. But the long cold distance did not matter at all. We were burning with the passion of knowing that we were doing something new and good in Finland. We were quite sure we were going in the right direction with our three cars driving into the winter night. During next two to three years, there were several new KRIS organizations created in Finland. The phenomenon was easy to describe with the word "avalanche". We would often get 40 telephone calls per day asking us about KRIS and what we could do to help someone coming out of prison.

WHAT IS THE MAGIC OF KRIS?

Today, we are about one thousand members. Approximately, one-hundred have a daily working space and job in KRIS. We work successfully in the reentry process together with the authorities. How was it possible? What is the magic in this model? When an addict or criminal stops the lifetime-long 24/7 Tivoli with different kinds of drugs and action, he or she has to redevelop all the moments of daily life, including his or her relationship with time itself. Without one's days and nights pressing relentlessly in a search for drugs, fixing, using, recovering, swindling, stealing or cheating to get more, one is suddenly swimming in 24 hours of new time every day. It can be daunting, even devastating, as one has to fill those many empty hours anew each day.

Now here is the magic! What could be more suitable for an ex-con who had been deeply addicted to drugs or crime, but is now free of them? He or she can start helping their brothers or sisters with their own experiences, those unique sequences in his or her own life that opened new ways to see and experience life. This knowledge on how to reshape time, fill the moments of one's life without drugs or crime not only can provide another with knowing guidance on what they are facing, but it also can fill one's own emptiness with new purpose. This, the experience of ex-addicts and ex-criminals on ways to deal with the struggles newly released prisoners face, is a commodity nobody can buy. This is the magic and the most valuable thing in the KRIS philosophy, the power of our solidarity recycling, empowering itself through nonjudgmental acceptance of our brethren as we

share our experience, knowledge and understanding of rebuilding time with the promise of a new life.

The core ideas behind KRIS are honesty, solidarity and comradeship, and abstinence from drugs. They are the foundation from which we built a reentry program that was not about surveillance, continual stigmatization, and erecting barriers between communities and released prisoners. Instead, we created a reentry program that was about welcoming ex-prisoners into a community that valued their knowledge and experience for the promise it holds for helping others. Honesty is protected by confidentiality, so our clients can discuss their issues and problems, and find solutions to them before they cause harm. Solidarity and comradeship helps us view ourselves within and act as a community.

We begin helping prisoners before they are released with housing, understanding of the support programs available and getting them the assistance they may need. We meet them at the prison gates as they are released, welcoming them back. We provide them with mentors with a common background and cell phones for both so they may talk anytime, as well as a broader peer support network. We assist them with job programs and training, drug treatment, and a special program to help them learn to live a crime free life. We have an outreach community service program that people or organizations in the wider community can call for KRIS members for help in the community. We established activity centers for individuals, families and children. We have sport programs, movies, group activities, holiday celebrations and meals. We also encourage participants to just drop-in to enjoy talking and networking with others in our community.

KRIS TODAY

Today's KRIS in Finland is a result of hundreds of mistakes, hundreds of misunderstandings, and also hundreds of gains and hundreds of successful decisions. Of course, it is also the result of work with thousands of clients. Our brothers and sisters are called clients when we write requests to get money. But they are friends when we are together. During the ten-year history of KRIS in Finland, we have been giving different kinds of support to thousands of prisoners reentering society.

My narrative represents a transition from a life of drugs and crime to the founding of KRIS in Finland and the passion behind establishing

this reentry program, which was developed and run by ex-convicts in its early years. The only policy was work, work and more work. Actually, we did not know how we should solve the problems on the way, but we acquired this knowledge through experience. We started keeping statistics without knowing what to keep or how to utilize them. So we wrote down everything. Week-by-week, month-by-month we learned from our clients and ourselves. We started to understand the structure, but we still had to ask many questions of ourselves and of this organization we were building. Nonetheless, in the beginning we had to make decisions without much organizational experience. Mostly, we were guided by our interactions with our clients who were like ourselves, searching for paths towards a new life. Nowadays we have better educated ex-convicts who have risen to top positions in the organization and who are good captains for the future. Moving forward, I want to point out the burning passion that led to the founding of KRIS continues on to this day. Without that nothing would have happened.

I retired this year after having served as the Executive Manager of KRIS in Finland for its first decade. Seventy years old is a suitable age for that. But I will carry the history and the policies of KRIS in my heart forever. This kind of organization is necessary if the problems of reentry and aftercare are to be solved. I can recommend with a warm heart our short philosophy to everyone who is interested about this work. Our three principals – 1) honesty, 2) comradeship and solidarity, and 3) abstinence from drugs – have proven their value as the foundation for a true community oriented reentry program. The experience and knowledge of the older members on how one can fall into and rationalize the spiraling vortex of a criminal way of life, and above all, how to break free from it, is the basis of how KRIS tries to help other people facing similar circumstances. Not surprisingly, we are a remarkably successful reentry program that now enjoys strong support and trust from the Ministry of Justice in Finland.

NOTE FROM THE SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORS

During June 2010, the International Scientific Conference on Global Perspectives on Reentry was held at the University of Tampere, Finland (Ekunwe and Jones, 2011). Through the efforts of Ikponwosa Ekunwe and Richard Jones and the support of the University of Tampere, a number

of Convict Criminologists from the United States were able to attend. In Tampere we met Matti “Kid” Hytönen and many members of KRIS Finland as we presented papers at the conference, spending many hours just talking together. We discussed KRIS with Finland’s Ministry of Justice, hearing firsthand their appreciation and support for the excellent work they were doing. Perhaps more importantly, we recognized in our discussions how similar our two organizations were. Members of both KRIS and Convict Criminology have worked to find ways to fuse their criminal experience with knowledge and vision. The ex-convicts of Convict Criminology at the conference were honored to be inducted as members of KRIS Finland in recognition of our similar journeys through life and our shared struggle to build a better future for us all.

REFERENCES

Ekunwe, I. O. and R. S. Jones (eds.) (2011) *Global Perspectives on Re-entry*, Tampere (FI): University of Tampere Press.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matti “Kid” Hytönen is an ex-convict. He has just retired at age 70 after serving as the Executive Manager of KRIS Finland. Though retired he continues to serve as Chairman of the Board of KRIS Central Organization in Finland, as well as Chairman of the Board for KRIS Southern in Finland. KRIS maintains an English version of their website at <<http://www.kris.fi/?id=163>>. KRIS is the translated acronym for the original Swedish program CRIS and one may see either acronym when researching the program in Finland.